

Conference paper for Visible Evidence 18
NYU, August 2011

Thanks, Dan. It's wonderful to be here at the conference and hear about all the interesting projects people are working on. I've been especially grateful to hear about new multi-platform documentary work and web-based distribution and exhibition. And with this current project, I'm especially glad for the increasingly close connection of media archivists and media scholars and artists as born out at this conference. I've done only a little archive work in the past, but being able to have contact with so many talented people in the area gives me enthusiasm and confidence to move ahead.

JoAnn Elam's *Everyday People* A Process-Oriented Analysis of a Labor Documentary's Archive

Today I will be talking about some of the archival materials for an unfinished labor documentary, *Everyday People*, about letter carriers and the US Postal service.

Feminist experimental filmmaker JoAnn Elam (1949-2009) is best known for two pioneering feminist experimental works, *Rape* (1976) and *Lie Back and Enjoy It* (198-). She also made a series of regular 8mm films, what I would call avant garde home movies, which were shown locally in Chicago. All of this material is now in the Chicago Film Archive, and along with help from her sister and me, the archive will be preserving and making available this work in a variety of platforms, including a website. There are over 700 film elements in the archive, which are currently in the process of being assessed for what they are, and what preservation they might need.

My particular project at the moment is trying to develop a web presence for her unfinished film about Postal letter carriers. She worked on *Everyday People* intensively for about 10 years (in the Carter and Reagan eras) while herself a letter carrier. Although unfinished, her extensive record keeping and journals allow us to see her work process and evolving political ideas. In her notes and extant footage, JoAnn has an extended analysis of how the Postal Service institution functions, its labor-management relations, and how individual carriers understand their situation. This is, remarkably, a current issue in Washington DC, with the US Postal Service almost bankrupt, and wanting to close 3700 post offices, fire 160,000 workers, change union contracts to fire more, change and reduce from established federal health and retirement benefits, end Saturday delivery, and carry out more extreme cost-cutting measures.

JoAnn's analysis, begun 30 years ago, extends from large-scale policy issues (since the PO was supervised by Congress, ultimately) to the details of the carriers' daily job. JoAnn also had an extremely witty way of looking at class as well as a gender analysis of social relations.

I am now in the process of working through these materials, with the aim of opening up the materials' multiple layers on a website which provides access to and organization of the physical archive at the Chicago Film Archives. Today I will quickly detail the scope of the archival materials and the aim of the project. The film was based on an understanding of labor history (with a special debt to Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital*) and also reflected Elam's origins as an experimental filmmaker and her repeated feedback screenings, particularly to labor activists.

To give you sense of the project, I'll show a short clip. This is from a 18 minute rough cut work print then transferred to VHS and now copied to DVD that JoAnn showed a number of times to letter carriers, documentary and experimental film audiences, and to labor activists in different parts of the US. As a one light work print, you will see mostly black and white images (the original is in color).

Show:

From 4:00 to 9:10

The film was begun in earnest during the Reagan Era, though JoAnn had been working at the Post office for about 5 years by that time. The incomplete film was shot and taken to screening rough cut edits, but my interest is not in "completing" a film that remained a work in progress for many years. As is the fate of many, perhaps most, documentary films, it refers to events of its time and there's no need to "finish" it. Rather it can stand as a model in the larger sense of what it means to make a political documentary in terms of production, politics, aesthetic and practical choices, and the role of the engaged maker.

In other words, rather than addressing us as citizens concerned with a specific set of issues, the archival presence can inform us about the way we conceive of such issues, strategize and delineate talking about them, and work with media to make the issues present.

The archive materials around the film provide deep insight into the creative process, a filmmaker's evolving political analysis, practical issues of workplace and home life, and challenges of funding and making self-financed documentary. It also presents a case study for issues of auto-ethnography and the pragmatics and ethics of filmmaking.

What we saw in the clip was the rapid montage visual editing that supports the sound track interviews as letter carriers detail certain aspects of the job. This section of the film was used by JoAnn to demonstrate what she was working on to others, particularly postal workers and she showed it in several cities at labor meetings or postal union events. She wanted to see if it made

sense to that audience as well as the general audience.

As someone who discussed the project with her at the time, and who filmed some of the first footage shot for the film (of JoAnn on her route), I saw some significant changes. The first versions of this section of the film were much more “experimental” in the sense that the cutting was rapid and often associative, and not linked to a specific narrative voice over by one of her interviewees. What was interesting to me was that even though it was much closer to her highly ironic experimental work, it was easily understood by the audience, even though they were not familiar with avant garde film. I think this was because they were so intrigued by the images of mailmen doing their job that the “radical form” did not get in the way of grasping the film. As a general rule, I think this is true and often discussed it with JoAnn. The idea that “ordinary people” need a kind of simple realism to grasp a complex idea is a myth of the unimaginative folks who themselves are insensitive to creative forms.

I should explain that originally JoAnn had plans for a much more inventive music track. The film would have used Sly and the Family Stone’s “Everyday People,” and the Marvellette’s “Mr. Postman,” but when she wrote to the publishers, they refused her. (Actually JoAnn was naïve about this; you can get permission, and usually for a reasonable fee, but you have to go through a rights management company which charges a hefty fee.) For the web, it would be possible to have hotlinks to online versions of these songs, so that people could be reminded of the original songs.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EgVOR28iG_o

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_dVt11UZ0uA

The film was begun at the same time as MTV was getting started, and music videos were just coming into their own as a unique genre.

There are more interviews that JoAnn did for the film which are available, both transcribed and as audiotape, dealing with issues that extended the discussion of the letter carrier’s lives. For example, “Joe” discusses the hazards of having 6 or 7 taverns on his route at which the daytime “regulars” knew him from his many years of service and offered to buy him a drink (and like many alcoholics, often tried to rope others into their behavior). Similarly, he explains, some lonely women on the route came to know him as the mailman, then offered to know him much more intimately. He explains his turning them down as not wanting to create jealousies or bad feelings if the arrangement didn’t work out and he remained on the route.

JoAnn had projected doing a whole section of the film on the postal Strike of 1970, but had not done the interviews with veterans of that era and had only scratched the surface of that history. This was a decisive event for the union in general because militant locals, especially in New York, began wildcat strikes in defiance of the national union. (I should explain here that the

letter carriers and the clerks—who work only inside the PO have separate unions which work together). The “crisis” of the postal service had been predicted, and the strike was a major national event, and Nixon had to handle it. The resolution took the PO further away from control by Washington politics (which was good) but also opened up the whole reorganization issue and marked the move to control of the workers and workplace. [I need to do more research on the history of the PO to follow the details here].

A more complicated problem is posed by the heavy duty analysis of labor that underlies JoAnn’s understanding. JoAnn learned the basics of the labor situation for letter carriers through personal experience, by being there on the job. But, to refer to a rather famous point made by Marx, Lenin, Gramsci, and Mao in their own distinct ways, from simple observation people can get to a certain point of recognition of their situation, but they need a more scientific analysis to understand the larger patterns. For JoAnn that was provided by one of the major books on the labor process, Harry Braverman’s *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1975). Braverman, working in the broad terrain of labor history and Marxist economics, decisively analyzed the industrial labor process of advanced capitalism. What he found was that rather than simple efficiency and increased productivity guiding management, (Something we could expect, and which would then explain workplace exploitation) actually control of the worker was the higher imperative for management.

While somewhat counter-intuitive, this insight explained a great deal of what JoAnn was experiencing in the Post Office, which in the 1970s was undergoing a wave of rapid change as “automation” was brought into the workplace, replacing skilled craft with mechanized production. JoAnn’s notebooks contain extensive notes and summaries from her close reading of Braverman (I should point out that she was brilliant, but also an auto-dictator, only later in life doing college studies and getting a degree in accounting).

But even more interesting, to me, is that as the film went on for over a decade, and her own relation to the project changed as she was fired for insubordination at the Post Office, had to find another career (which she did as tax preparer, then bookkeeper, then accountant), she returned to Braverman and wrote a series of acute remarks correcting and modifying his original work. This was the “shop floor” response, the testing theory against practice, that made her analysis so determined, original, and important. So, I think that web publication will allow me to bring that forth in a coherent way.

The film went through a long hiatus in the later 1980s and throughout the 1990s. Part of this was a function of JoAnn losing her job at the PO and having to scramble to find another way to make a living. Part of it was family matters: JoAnn’s mother lived in the same building and developed cancer. Her husband lost his job as a letter carrier and also had to find work while dealing with alcoholism and recovery. In looking through the archive notebooks I was somewhat surprised to find she had begun to develop a further analysis, particularly in terms of revisiting the issues of work and labor in the current neoliberal period. From reading her notes on that subject, I sense

that she was refining, from a distance, the discussion of labor and seeing it in a clearer light, but also one which would model the changes in the Post Office as emblematic of the rise of neoliberalism in the post Vietnam war era.

As my work on the archive continues, some of these matters will become clearer, and as more of the archive becomes available hopefully more people will be able to contribute to studying the corpus of her films, and this unfinished project.

Thank you.